

Irina B. Rubert

Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, St.Petersburg

Mythologem in the Language of Mass Media

Myth is regarded both as a source of universal historical and artistic substance (matter) meant for interpretation (comprehension) of the world, a descriptive means of cognition, explication of reality by constructing its patterns, and, as a peculiar imperative, a guide to action that contains prescription for a person or society. Therefore, a classical work of literature as well as a production of mass media is based on mythologems, thus enabling the addressee "to pass from personal to nation-wide and even to human-wide" (Mekhata 1984, p. 192).

The stability of myths provides the opportunity to speak about signs of a specific type: mythologems existing in the "historical memory" of a nation. A mythologem is understood as a conceptual structure implicitly containing narratives about a certain event showing mythological correlates that are linguistically or graphically explicable. The plane of expression of the mythologem unites two or more planes of content: One of them correlates with a personifying mythological name and the other(s) with a symbolised entity. The basic difference between a concept and a mythologem lies in the mode of categorisation of the world. It is a classificatory, "taxonomical", approach that is typical of modern man. Its essence consists of the search for distinctive (integral and differential) features of comprehended situations and comparison of them with mental representations, including patterns of these situations in the system of hypo-hypernymic, temporal, and causal relationships. Whereas mythological consciousness is characterised by search for similar features, peculiarities due to the fact of their existence could serve as a basis for uniting heterogeneous phenomena into one group. This "analogical" way of conceptualisation created the regularity necessary in the struggle with the chaos of a hostile world. Modern rational consciousness singles out taxons according to central (intentional) qualities of notions. In ancient consciousness, it was mythological names that often appeared as "generic" terms for a number of contiguous or similar notions (for instance, *Poseidon* – water, sea, storm, etc.). Recurrence of mythological motifs in the communication of different times and nations serves as good proof of "cognitive real-

ity" (van Dijk's term) of the mythologem. The exceptional stability of myths, despite technological progress, provides evidence concerning the deep-cerebrum localisation of the mythologem.

As long as one of the main tasks of the language of mass media is to form most efficiently the behavioural patterns of the addressee which exert influence on his emotional sphere and subconsciousness, the mythologem becomes one of the most productive means of this kind. The influence of a myth on public life can take various forms. For example, people, inclined to mysticism, interpret objective historical facts by the use of myths. Interpretation in the light of mythological plots acknowledges a minimum of logic; they are based on the principle of "analogy". For instance, the shipwreck of the Titanic may be viewed as inevitable since the Titans or Atlantes sank to the bottom of the ocean together with the mythical Atlantis. "By analogy", the Titanic found its last undersea haven in the Atlantic Ocean.

The opposition of "one's"/"smb else's" characteristic of mass media roots in opposition to the "middle" and "outer" world is considered essential for determining the system of coordinates of the whole world picture since the earliest period of Germanic history. In Germanic mythology, people's dwelling-place was designated by the notion "middle world" – *midjungarths* (Gt), *middangeard* (OE), *mithgarthr* (O Icel), and *mittelgart* (OHG). *Gart*, *geard* – is a place enclosed with a fence. Man's "middle world," thoroughly enclosed, was contrasted with the outer space – the land of darkness, evil, misfortune, and monsters (*utgarthr*), hence, the recently prevailing ideas about the "evil empire" in the American mass media. In view of recent events, the world *utgarthr* is no longer associated with Russia but with the "Third World". In this case, the name "third world" is extremely significant.

Some emotionally coloured lexical units contain a mythologem that is not necessarily realised by native speakers. Thus, for example, the meaning of the word "nightmare" can be traced back to the name of a monster in Scandinavian and Celtic mythology – *Mara* (sea).

In the course of time, the mythologem becomes enveloped in numerous cultural layers and acquires connotations. For example, the name "swastika" originating from the Sanskrit words "sue" ("well/good") and "asti" ("being",

“existence”) used to possess positive emotional overtones; consequently, it was cultivated by different nations. In ancient (classical) tradition, the right-side swastika was associated with Artemis (in Roman mythology – Diana); in China, it symbolised “yin”, and in Scandinavian cultural traditions (with forked lightning), it was a symbol of Thor. The application of the swastika by the Nazis made the associative aura of this symbol negative. The mythologem capable of expressing connotative meaning, thus, displays its signature.

Being a sign, the mythologem includes the name, the denotatum, and the designatum. The difference in correlation between these components allows the discrimination of three types of mythologems: predicate, prototypical, and graphologem. **Predicate mythologem**, the semantic core of which is strongly attracted by the plot and logical structure, has the predicate as its central explicant in the text. An example of this type is the mythologem of the **way**. Here the name is brought into correlation with the most abstract, generalised, non-discrete idea of the way, comparable with the travels of mythological wayfaring personages (Odyssey) in the denotatum; clear-cut, demarcated logical structure in the designatum including the actants (characters setting out on a journey, being on the way, or impelling to set off), and the predicate (the movement, the going). The designatum also contains the notion about different types of predicate both in its literal meaning (movement, displacement in space) and in a figurative sense (course of life). **Graphologem**. The central explicant is a visual symbol, whereas the semantic core approaches the denotative component (for example, the mythologem of the circle). The content of the denotative component is made up of the generalised image of the circle; the designatum comprises notions about the circle as a geometrical figure (the notions of circumference, radius, diameter, and formula of the circle area) and about qualities associated with something round (infinity and absolute symmetry). **Prototypical mythologem**. The denotatum and the designatum of the given type draw nearer in a certain prototype that is, at the same time, a semantic core of the prototypical mythologem. The mythologems of water, world tree, and fire can be considered examples of this type.

All these kinds of mythologem appear in the language of modern mass media.

Reference

- Mekhta, S. (1984): The Meaning of the Classic Heritage for Today. In: Magazine for Foreign Literature 3. [Мехта, С. (1984): Значение классики для нашего времени. // Иностранная литература, № 3.]